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COMPACT GUIDE TO SHORT STORY WRITING

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HOW A SHORT STORY IS LIKE A FEAST

by NELL STEVENS

I am an impatient reader of novels. I'm not fast, but I'm very determined, constantly evaluating how many chapters are left, fighting the urge to skip ahead and get a glimpse of the final pages. I need to feel I'm making progress, that I'm getting through it, that - no matter how much I'm enjoying it, however good the story - it will be over soon.

I've always been embarrassed by this. It's a kind of laziness - isn't it? - to make such a meal of reading, to be asking, plaintively, "Are we nearly there yet?" from the back seat, almost as soon as the journey begins. But recently, as I've been thinking about short stories, and what advantage the short story form has over the novel, I've reevaluated that impatience. Because, really, the reason I can't wait to get to the end of a book is that the ending is the best part. The thrust of the whole narrative is toward a moment when mysteries will be solved, families reunited, peace made. Endings are great. No wonder I'm in a hurry to get there.

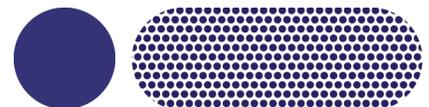
For the ending-hungry reader, the short story is a feast. It delivers that

much-craved ending after twenty pages rather than two hundred.

This is not to say that the endings of novels and short stories do entirely similar work. In the novel, even the most open, fluid shrug of an ending offers, however obliquely, a kind of resolution. In contrast, the short story has less weight placed on its conclusion and therefore more room to be playful, slippery, sly, and surprising.

Right after something momentous happens, there's a moment of absolute stillness. The consequences of the momentous thing begin to unspool, one by one, in your mind. It is exactly this kind of moment - stillness followed by realization - that happens in the aftermath of a good short story. The narrative can end just at the point when the balance has tipped, order has been disturbed, leaving the reader to pause and understand only once the story is over the many and varied consequences of the events it has described: now this will happen, and then this, and then, oh my god, this. The ending can be a suggestion rather than a resolution. A

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short story can be a question mark as much as an exclamation point. In this way, the satisfaction afforded by the ending of a novel occurs, not on the page of the short story, but afterward, in the reader's mind. Not with a bang, so to speak, but with the implication of a bang in the future.

To the short story writer, this is a gift and a challenge. If the ending is merely a jumping-off point for the consequences of the action, the work of the rest of the narrative is to identify and explore the catalyzing event. I try to pinpoint moments in my characters' lives, however small, that will change them forever: an encounter, a decision. The action itself might be relatively quiet, might seem inconsequential, but by the end of the story, the reader knows that it will echo and reverberate and grow louder for the rest of the character's life. The short story hones in on the tiny, powerful moments that so easily get lost in the sweep of a novel.

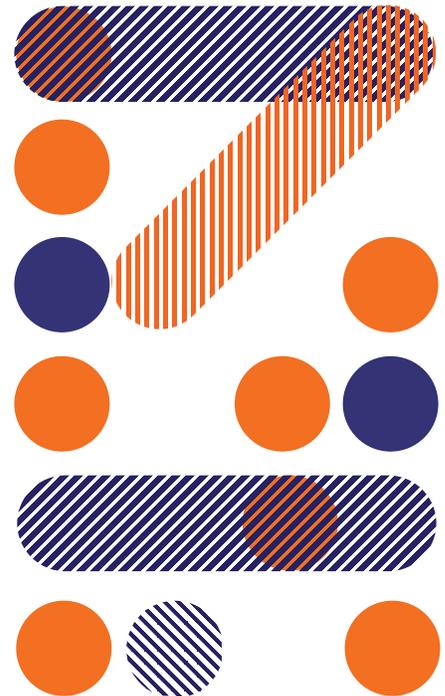
A great short story offers an ending that is not really an ending. It gives its reader the punch and satisfaction of narrative conclusion—and, simultaneously, that delicious unspooling. Short stories, in their briefness, contain their own afterlives, which resonate in the reader's imagination long after the book has

been closed: and then this, and then this, and then this.

NELL STEVENS is the author of *BLEAKER HOUSE*



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THE 3 MOST COMMON MISSING PIECES OF A GOOD SHORT STORY

by JOSH BARKAN

Here are three things in great short stories that are frequently missing in the stories of my MFA students, or in the stories of aspiring writers: sufficient conflict; access to the interior consciousness of the protagonist; and something strange, quirky, truly unusual that the reader wants to read about.

How many times have you sat down to either read your own story-in-progress or the story of a fellow student or friend, and it is simply boring? We are reluctant to tell that friend that their story may be well crafted in some ways, but it is simply not interesting to us. Often, the problem is just a lack of conflict. The antagonists don't push back hard enough against your protagonist, never forcing them to confront their genuine, internal flaws. Consider a great story like Richard Ford's "Rock Springs." The protagonist, Earl, has problems stacked up all around him. He's just stolen a car after writing bad checks - a flashy car that will be

more noticeable to cops. He's far from the state he's trying to escape to, Florida, when the engine light flashes on his dashboard. He has a young daughter with him (not your typical crook getaway partner), and the woman that has been his partner the last couple of years drinks hard in the middle of the day in the car, with her feet on the dashboard, while she tells the story of how she once won a monkey in a bet from a Vietnam vet and she let the monkey die through neglect. More than all of these external problems, the important internal problem is that Earl has been a dreamer - just like his neglectful partner. He's always thinking there is a pot of gold he can get - something for nothing. And where his car breaks down, in Wyoming, there is a real goldmine that forces him to realize he has been chasing dreams. Add to this that his girlfriend leaves him by the end of the story, and he's forced to steal another car, all while he realizes his predicament, and you have the amount

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU SAT DOWN TO EITHER READ YOUR OWN STORY-IN-PROGRESS OR THE STORY OF A FELLOW STUDENT OR FRIEND, AND IT IS SIMPLY BORING?



GREAT SHORT STORIES GIVE US ACCESS TO THE INTERIOR CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE PROTAGONIST.

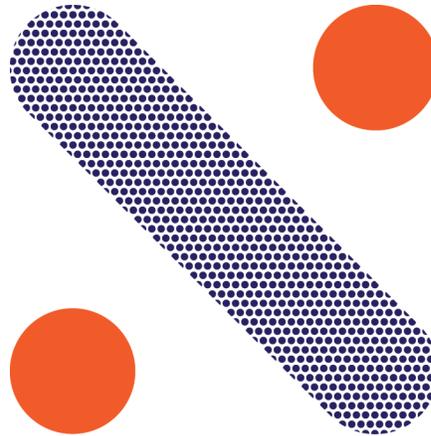
of conflict necessary to pull the reader along. There is something truly at stake in the story because of the conflict: Earl's freedom and whether he'll go to prison, the safety of his daughter, and the bigger issue of how someone fundamentally good may go bad because the socioeconomic deck has been stacked against him.

Great short stories give us access to the interior consciousness of the protagonist. Earl vacillates between whether he is to blame for his life of crime or whether he is somehow a victim. On the victim

side, he recalls the poverty he grew up in and the lack of care his parents gave him. He thinks, likewise, about how his partner didn't mean to kill the monkey she stole - it was

an accident, as she tied the monkey up to a doorknob, using a string that was too short. Earl thinks about how his intentions are good. He knows he means well. And at the same time, after his car breaks down, he wanders off to a trailer by the goldmine next to him and he speaks to a nice woman who is taking care of her brain-damaged grandchild. Here, too, is someone who has been given misfortune.

But rather than turn to crime, the grandmother takes careful steps to help her grandchild, and her husband works hard in the goldmine, trying to save up for retirement. Earl is forced to think about the difference between his path and the path of this grandmother. The contrast leads him to talk with his partner about the way he chases a pot of gold and how the two are just a pair of "fools." The end of the story has Earl imagining whether others can know what it is like to be in his shoes, as he gets ready to steal yet another car.



Without the interior consciousness, it is hard to see what your protagonist is learning about their predicament, or how they are trying to escape from their difficult situation.

What you may have noticed by now is that there are some definite elements of quirkiness and oddness in the story: How did a monkey from a Vietnam vet suddenly appear in this story? (He was won in a bet and then neglected.) What is an African-American grandmother doing with a brain-damaged child in the middle of a

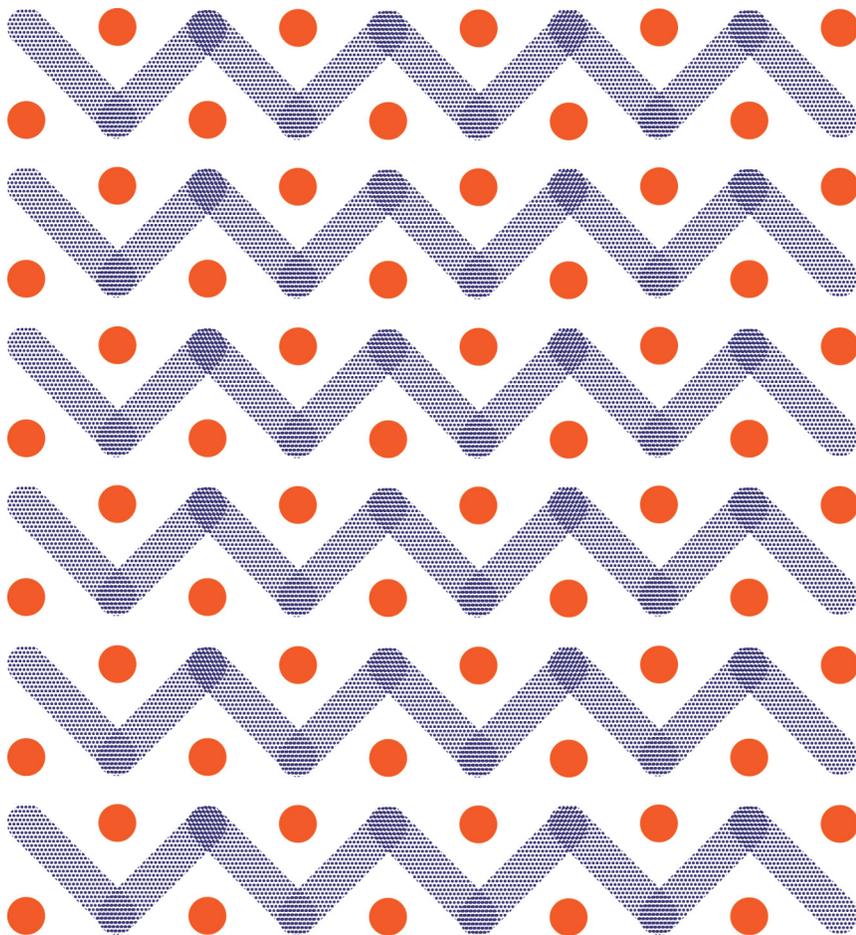
very white part of Wyoming? (A kindly grandmother who is going to teach Earl the wrongs of his path.) How did a goldmine happen to be right next to where Earl's car breaks down? Readers like strange coincidences in short stories. Even if describing everyday events, look for the strange detail, the strange moment. The town of Rock Springs is booming with crime and prostitutes, with the money of the goldmine. It is being overrun with people making "bad" decisions. It is strangely booming, yet falling apart, just as Earl's car breaks down outside of the town.

With sufficient conflict, access to the interior consciousness, and strangeness, your story can be great.

JOSH BARKAN is the author of *MEXICO*



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WHAT SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE KNEW ABOUT STORYTELLING

by FORREST LEO

When all is said and done, it seems to me that the greatest storyteller who ever lived must be Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Others write more brilliantly or spin yarns that are as exciting as his, but for the sheer joy he brings a reader he has not, I think, been equaled. Through some peculiar alchemy, he invents characters that are every bit as real to us as many men and women who actually drew breath. Sometimes more so.

I love his novels, and I don't disagree with his own assessment that *Sir Nigel and The White Company* are the finest things he produced. But while they may be more perfect pieces of literature when judged on their own, they pale compared to the cumulative effect of his short stories.

In his stories he builds entire worlds. He creates mythologies as surely as the superhero comics that he influenced. (Batman, who debuted in "Detective Comics," is after all just Sherlock Holmes with daddy issues and a cape.)

Read one story about the swaggering Brigadier Gerard and your evening has been improved; read them all and you've apprehended a great swath of Napoleonic history and feel as though you've met the diminutive Corsican. His mysteries work that way, too, only more so.

I discovered the Holmes and Watson stories while growing up in the woods in Alaska. This is a peculiar place to read gas-lit tales of a metropolis, but it was wondrous. As my mom read them aloud I constructed all of London in my head. Guided by Conan Doyle's outsider descriptions of the city (he grew up in Scotland and northern England), I imagined Victorian London as a place every bit as fantastical as Camelot, peopled by heroes as dashing as the Knights of the Round Table.

I recall the thrill as the King of Belgravia swept into 221B, wearing a mask and carrying a dreadful secret. Chills ran up my spine as the footprints at Baskerville

**IN HIS STORIES
HE BUILDS
ENTIRE
WORLDS.**



Hall were identified as those of a gigantic hound. I gasped as the speckled band was revealed to be a hideous - well, you had better read it yourself, if you haven't already.

Most things you read in childhood influence the rest of your life in oblique, hazy ways. They stay with you like a pleasant feeling somewhere on the soles of your feet or in the pit of your belly, warming you up and reminding you of the wonders of being alive. Holmes and Watson are different, though. Yes, you remember the stories in the way I just described - but there's an added element. You have friends. The lithe chemist and sturdy military doctor walk beside you down the street, drink coffee with you, remind you to notice every detail and omit nothing. They are, in a word, real.

I'm certainly not the only person to think so. A whole group of brilliant people who call themselves the Baker Street Irregulars do, too. They get together and play the Great Game, arguing about what Watson's middle name is and what precisely occurred regarding the giant rat of Sumatra. This is not a practice unique to adherents of Conan Doyle, but no others take it quite so far. His stories don't only invite it, they demand it. They only grow richer with age and familiarity.

Conan Doyle is unsurpassed in his ability to create characters who inspire such love in readers. Michael Dirda, in his invaluable study of the man, quotes Vincent Starrett, who sums up the matter perfectly: "Here dwell still together two men of note / Who never lived and so can never die."

FORREST LEO is the author of *THE GENTLEMAN*



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HOW TO WRITE A SHORT STORY WITH CLARITY AND ECONOMY

by PATRICK RYAN

One of the cold, hard truths of short story writing is that you only get one read. Whether your story is part of a collection, or in a magazine someone's holding, or in the hands of someone who's considering publishing it, you usually only get one shot per story with any one person. (Right? When was the last time you started reading a story, didn't feel drawn in or - worse - became confused about what was going on, and restarted it?) With that in mind, I place a high value on clarity and economy.

A great way to embark on a short story is to begin with a sentence you can't argue with. Start with a scene (instead of a setup) and with an action (instead of commentary). Let the readers know - right away or very close to right away - where they are and who they're with and what's going on. No one relishes confusion, and no one likes having his or her time wasted.

Who's your ideal reader? Don't

imagine someone who loves your work and gets what you're trying to do. Imagine the most impatient person you know, the one whose attention is hard to hold on to, the one who says spit it out or get to the point when you're trying to tell an anecdote. That's your ideal reader. If you can successfully engage someone like that, you're probably not cutting yourself any slack in the clarity department, and you're definitely not cutting yourself any slack in the economy department.

Don't worry about whether the story you're trying to tell is interesting to anyone but you. Make it interesting. One of the best ways I know to do that is to make the minutiae as familiar and universal as possible. Your character might be picking up a vacuum from the vacuum repair shop and thinking about an ex-lover. She might be standing on the deck of a listing ship, filled with wonder and panic as she watches a leviathan rise out of the sea. He might be nine years

A GREAT WAY TO EMBARK ON A SHORT STORY IS TO BEGIN WITH A SENTENCE YOU CAN'T ARGUE WITH.



old and watching his parents' marriage dissolve in a solution of bickering and alcohol. Regardless, your reader wants your characters to feel at least a little familiar. No matter what your character does, say, once that leviathan is established on the page, having her sweat, letting her hands tremble, making her forehead tighten when it first appears - those things are familiar to everyone.

Another way to make your story interesting for your reader is to write with compassion for every one of your characters. That doesn't mean you have to want to hug them all. It means that you've done the work of getting inside each character's head (regardless of the story's point of view) and figuring out what it's like in there. The world is full of nice people and jerks, generous people and selfish dolts, good Samaritans and villains, and here's the key to unlocking them all: Difficult people don't see themselves as difficult. Boring people don't see themselves as boring. Villains don't see themselves as villains. We all feel

justified in doing what we're doing in the moment we're doing it. I know that's a bit of a generalization, but use that as your starting point when you have a walk-on character who says something insensitive, or when you're writing about a father who barks at his kids the moment he gets home, or

a woman who steals a lot of cash from her employer and goes on the lam, or the guy who rents her a motel room and then dresses up like his mother and wields a kitchen knife. Write about all of them with compassion. That way, they can do less-than-ideal or regrettable or even terrible things and still feel real to your reader.

Keep in mind that in nearly every short story, the main character isn't exactly the same at the end as she or he is at the beginning. If you ever catch yourself midway through writing a story and think, *What's the point?*, that's the point. Experience changes us - sometimes in very small, barely noticeable ways, but it changes us. It adds to us, or it subtracts from us.

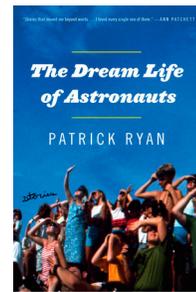
KEEP IN MIND THAT IN NEARLY EVERY SHORT STORY, THE MAIN CHARACTER ISN'T EXACTLY THE SAME AT THE END AS SHE OR HE IS AT THE BEGINNING.



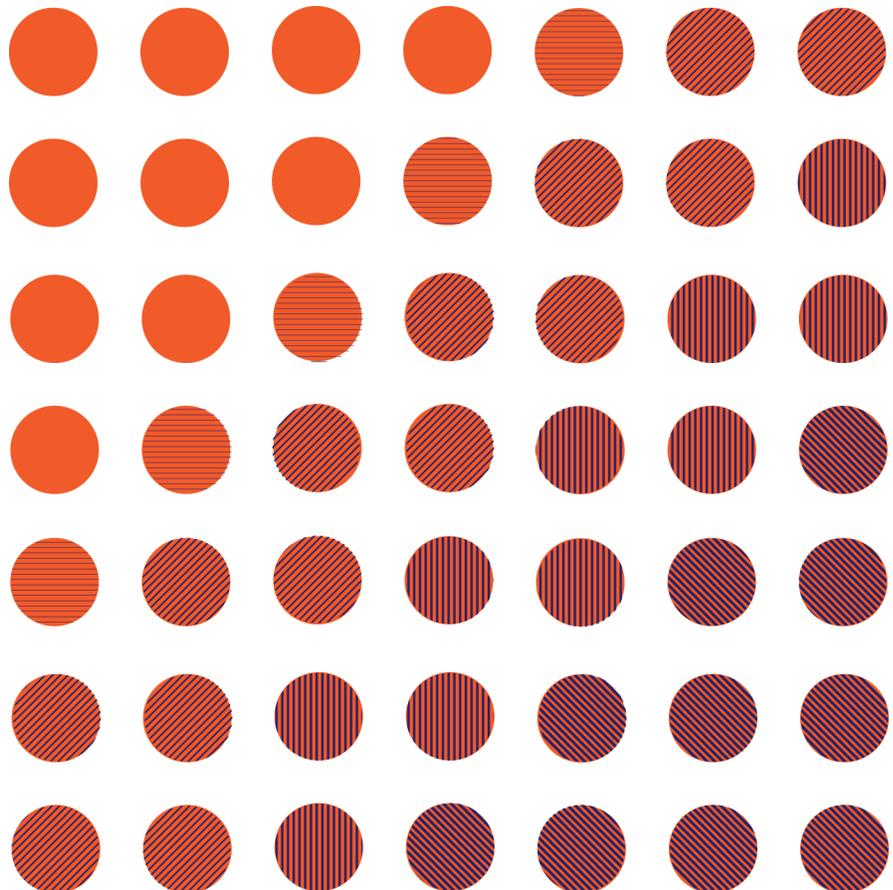
Lastly, don't trust yourself too much. You're the best person for the job of writing your short story, but you aren't the best person for spotting its shortcomings. You aren't the best person for gauging whether or not your ending makes sense, for example. I once had a main character die at the end of a story and felt pretty satisfied with the quiet way I'd rendered it - until I gave the story to two different friends, and neither one of them realized the character had died. That wasn't a call for me to defend why I'd written it the way I had; it was a call for me to go back to my desk, roll up my sleeves, and fix a problem I hadn't been able to see.

You're writing for other people, so let a few of them weigh in before the stakes get high.

PATRICK RYAN is the author of *THE DREAM LIFE OF ASTRONAUTS*



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THE ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL SHORT STORY

by LAURA FURMAN

It's easier to say what a short story isn't than what it is. It isn't an anecdote and it isn't a section of a novel and it isn't an essay. (There is a form called the long story but that's another song.) Though short stories since Chekhov often end ambiguously, they can't end indefinitely and still be a full story.

Short story endings are often a sore point with readers. What happened? What's going to happen next? If these are the reader's questions at the end of a story, the story might not yet be right. Even when I don't understand the full meaning and stretch of a story's ending, if I don't feel finality - the way you feel when

someone walks out the door - then something's gone wrong.

Short story beginnings demand a lot of writer and reader. The

reader must be immediately involved. This doesn't mean that the reader understands the beginning any more than the ending. It just means that the writer has succeeded in placing you, the reader, in the world of the story, and you don't dare to leave until it's over. In reading a fine story, we

feel involved, curious, and committed to the story's world.

The beginning and the ending of a short story are part of the wonderful secret of the story and why it's neither a novel nor



SHORT STORY BEGINNINGS DEMAND A LOT OF WRITER AND READER.

A STORY THAT BEGINS BY RETREATING INTO THE PAST HAS THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE.

a novella nor a footnote nor an anecdote. The short story has a formal completeness but doesn't call attention to this in the best work.

The present, ongoing action of the story and the past - call it background or ghosts - sometimes push against each other. Sometimes the past sneaks in front of the present and tries to block the way forward. When I read stories by master writers - Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro, Katherine Anne Porter, William Trevor - I find a path to follow through the crowded forest of the story's world.

A story that begins by retreating into the past has the cart before the horse. In a good beginning, the reader's right there in the story's world, in the present, and when the past comes lurching from behind, the reader knows the difference between now and then. More and more in the short story - Raymond Carver's work is an obvious example - writers give little weight to the characters' past, to family life, pedigree, war stories. Yet time is such a powerful force in the short story that without knowing that a character grew up on a dairy farm in Ohio, we know something of history that the character carries by the way he or she acts and reacts

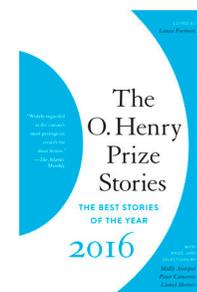
in the present.

In the short story there's always a shadow cast on the present by what has just been said or not said, or thought but not done, or even by a wish.

While the story's plot develops, past and present wrangle with one another, and the characters struggle against that tension. At the story's end, there's the peace that comes with the release of tension, for good or ill.

The greatest success comes when the writer's skill lets the reader float on the story's current and notice nothing of form or technique.

LAURA FURMAN is editor of *THE O. HENRY PRIZE STORIES 2016*



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THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPARTMENTALIZING AS A WRITER

by MARY GORDON

As is so often the case, what is a good strategy for writing is not always a good strategy for a good or happy life. That is to say, we are always taught not to compartmentalize and to be flexible. The only way I have been able to survive as a writer, also a wife, teacher and mother, is to compartmentalize like mad. So that if I have two or three ideas going at once, I discipline myself to do only one at a time, promising myself that after an hour I will allow myself to move on.

What is important for me is to stick to a writing schedule, which means my tush is on the chair for a certain amount of time every day: I don't re-

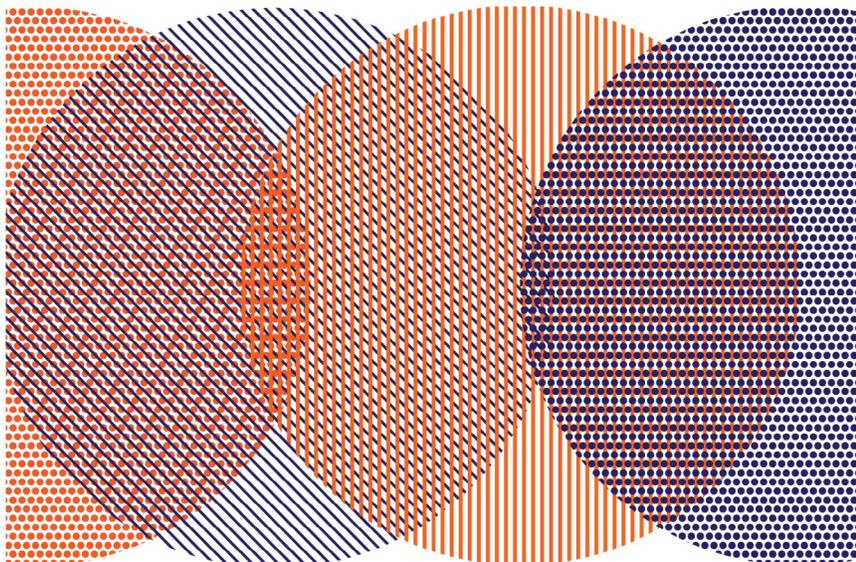
quire any page or word output from myself, just a time of not moving on to something else.

Writing when I had young children and limited time to work was good training for this.

MARY GORDON is the author of *THERE YOUR HEART LIES*



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HOW TO IGNORE YOUR INSTINCTS AND FIND THE REAL STORY

by EMILY RUSKOVICH

SOME IMAGES CATCH HOLD AND LINGER. THEY ARE IMBUED WITH IRRATIONAL MEANING. THEY ARE THE SOULS OF STORIES I HAVEN'T YET FOUND.

For me, so much of writing is chasing feelings I don't understand. Sometimes the feelings mingle with memory, and sometimes they don't. Paying attention to these feelings, which can arise at any time, is crucial. Sometimes, at first, I chase the feeling too fast. I make an easy story out of it, using instincts I have developed as a fiction writer. The story is neat. Its climax is exciting. A great deal is at stake. But usually, this first story is not the real story. It's just a structure I build quickly in my mind to house the original feeling. And the real story is the one I find only by actively not forming a story out of it, only by actively ignoring my instincts. Instead, I allow images to gather in my imagination in this strange way that is very difficult for me to describe. These images might gather over the course of a day, or over several years. The images feed the feeling until, finally, the feeling is whole enough for me to capture it inside of a scene. And then it happens fast.

It's as if fiction is this parallel world

that is real and living all the time, and these feelings that authors get are simply tiny collisions of our world and the other. It always feels like an accident to me, when I dip into that other world, because I don't know the rules of how these worlds overlap, and I can't sense their orbits. This is not a metaphor; this is actually what it feels like when I write. A few days ago, my cat licked a mosquito off a cold window, and immediately I felt the first flicker of a story. Why? I don't know. A few days before that, my brother and I scooped with an old coffee can a gelatinous sac of bullfrog eggs out of a grassy ditch, and I felt it then, too, as if I'd accidentally scooped into that can a portal to that other world.

Again, this isn't a metaphor. It's actually how it feels. Some images catch hold and linger. They are imbued with irrational meaning. They are the souls of stories I haven't yet found.

A few summers ago, walking through a very small town, my

mother pointed to an old farmhouse and told me about a relative of hers who once lived there. When he was a baby, his father put him out on the porch in the winter, hoping the baby would freeze to death. The story made me very sad for my relative, and angry at the cruelty of his father. I began to imagine that someone walking by the house looked in and saw the baby on the frozen porch, and I imagined the stranger breaking the window with a rock, climbing in, and rescuing the child.

This was the first story, the easy one, partly because it was so close to the real story, and partly because the emotions were exact - sadness for the baby boy, fury and disgust for the father, love for the stranger. It was compelling, and it made me feel.

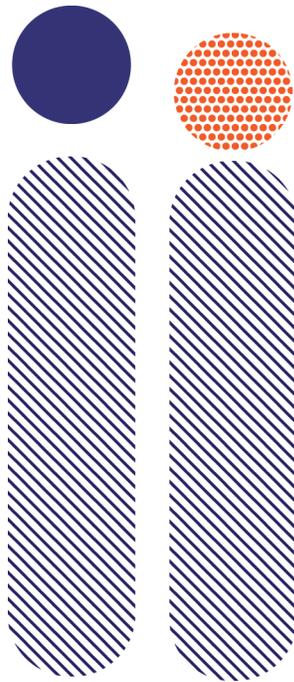
But it was not the real story. The real story began to rise in me the farther we walked away from that house, talking about other things. If the light that afternoon had been a little different, if the dust hadn't

tasted in the air the way it did, if we had stopped for a cup of coffee or even just to tie a shoe - it's likely the story would have stopped at its own trueness. But as it was, it grew. Suddenly, I saw the porch in my mind, and it was completely different from the real porch, the one I'd seen just minutes ago. And locked inside of it was not my relative, but a little girl I'd never known, ten years old with dirty-blonde hair and a bright and cruel face, a tight, twitching mouth.

She was standing in the middle of that porch that was built out of windows. This was her punishment for something (what?) terrible that she had done, to stand out here in the cold, locked out of the house and also out of the out-of-doors, in the frozen in-

between space that was the covered porch. The windows were framed with frost. The locked door behind her was blue. I saw the stale, wicker chair beside her. I could smell its frozen cushion. On the ground, a cup of water, as if her father could assuage his guilt by reminding him-

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self he had given her that. The girl wore a dress. She could have put on her coat, which was wadded up beneath that wicker chair, but she did not, though her bare arms were covered in goosebumps. She stood perfectly straight in the middle of the porch. And what she was wasn't sad - she was wildly glad. She relished her own hunger; she devoured that cold. Her breath was bright and beautiful and scary.

And, suddenly, it wasn't her father who had put her there but her older brother, a teenager, fed up and hardworking and in charge, much older than his sister but not half as smart. Inside, he is secretly pained by having locked his little sister on

the winter porch to punish her. He feels tired and guilty and half-panicked at what he's done and what he can't quite decide to undo, though it would be the simplest thing in the world, to just unlock that door and let her win. He's looking through the curtain of a different window, seeing the passersby, his neighbors, glance at his poor sister, locked out

in the cold, and he is punished by their glances, by their shame of him.

And suddenly, it's not the girl who is being punished by her brother, and it's not her brother who is being punished by the glances of the passersby; it is the passersby themselves who are being punished by the girl. They glance up at those windows and see her staring out at them, see

her gathering the pity from their eyes until what's left in them is only their own shame, as if they, somehow, are to blame for the abuse she is enduring so bravely, in total silence, in total stillness, hands clasped elegantly in front of her. And they know that she is making a display of herself, but they are wrong

about why: They think she stands that way, in pained grace, because she is trying to preserve her dignity. They think she wants to appear to the world as strong and brave for their sakes. And such striving makes her even more pitiable in their eyes, her stern innocence a terrible shock in the winter light. Should they go knock on the door? Chastise whom-



ever has done this to her? Should they call the police? Should they spare the girl by pretending they haven't seen and just hope, pray, that it will end soon for her? It is terrible, the indecision and the shame.

The girl knows all this, of course, and doesn't mind the cold because of what she knows. She is glad for this singular chance to stand in this perfect glass case, like a museum display, and exhibit to the world the stupidity of her brother and the culmination of all the injustices inflicted upon her beautiful self.

And she triumphs; to the passersby, the girl becomes more than herself, a feeling they carry into their own warm houses. For some of them, she is a memory of having long ago endured pain inflicted by adults; for others, she is the memory of having just yesterday inflicted that pain upon a child. She is guilt; she is blame. She is a trapped and frozen breath that chills her brother to his core and lasts in him forever.

All of this is only an instant, something I felt over the course of a single summer walk beside my mom. And yet this instant has stayed inside of me for two years now, and nothing has ever come of it except this essay, an answer to a question: What is writing like?

Maybe there is nothing more to this story. Maybe this is it.

Or maybe, one day, she'll wake up

inside of me, suddenly furious to discover that she has been used as an example. I will be there on the sidewalk, and she will look out, and I will see her blame me for what I've done to her story, for my cold exploitation of her pain. Suddenly, she will look down at the floor, where the cup of water has frozen solid after all this time. And she will bend down, bang that cup against the floorboards until that cylinder of ice slides out. Then she will pick the ice up, wrap it in the coat she removes from beneath that wicker chair, and bang it against every window, breaking them all.

Then, like fiction itself, she'll climb out, down into her yard, face me for an instant, and turn away.

EMILY RUSKOVICH is the author of *IDAHO*



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**MAYBE THERE
IS NOTHING
MORE TO THIS
STORY. MAYBE
THIS IS IT.**



SHORT STORIES: THEY'RE JUST LIKE LIFE

by SIOBHAN FALLON

There is incredible potential within a short story, and I think a story collection offers almost infinite leeway with plot and scope, length and style. I turned to this form when I was writing my first book, *You Know When the Men Are Gone*, because I wanted to move freely from one very different world to another: from soldiers at their Forward Operating Base in Iraq, to the spouses at home in Fort Hood, Texas; from military base apartments to a dirty basement lair in an off-post neighborhood. The nature of a short story, as a concentrated burst of time and action within a rather small window, and the ability to completely change gears and showcase a new issue in each separate tale, seemed most apt for the book I was trying to write at the time.

In a collection, stories are arranged next to each other, not quite touching, almost acting like neighbors. This reminds me of life on an army base, where everyone is loosely connected, all of us either family members or active duty military. But we don't necessarily know each other intimately, although we might pass each other in the aisles of the Com-

missary grocery store or see each others' children at the base playgrounds. The stories of *You Know When the Men Are Gone* are similarly linked, with some characters colliding while others only intersect occasionally. I also appreciate the very deliberate pause between each story, how it can imply a time jump or geographical change. This abruptness is also true to military life, that episodic quality of being at home with your wife and children one moment, and then being deployed to Iraq the next. A collection can capture those unexpected arrivals and departures, all those gaps and uncertainties, the quirky marital misunderstandings and the explosive insurgent firefights.

I just finished writing a novel, *The Confusion of Languages*. This book started out as a short story, then grew into a collection of interconnected stories. But over time it settled into a traditional novel following the lives of two characters in Amman, Jordan, over a period of five months. As I wrote and rewrote, I realized I needed more than a short story's allotment of pages to figure out each of my main char-

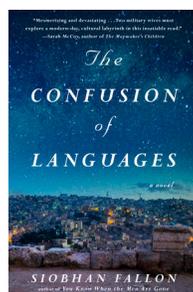
**IN A
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NEIGHBORS.**

acters. I also found that while my short stories don't always tie up neatly (sometimes I like to leave an ending a little ambiguous in an attempt to let the reader's imagination play a role), I felt like my novel demanded a clear start and finish. If I was asking the reader to trace the lives of characters for such a long span of time (and pages), then there were certain expectations I was determined to meet. In my mind, it's a bold and intricate map I had to draw and color in - something with road signs and architecture, Technicolor mountains and deserts, busy highways and empty roads, all twisting and turning into a climax and denouement. But a short story, as a form, feels more forgiving, more a sketch, a glimpse, a held breath.

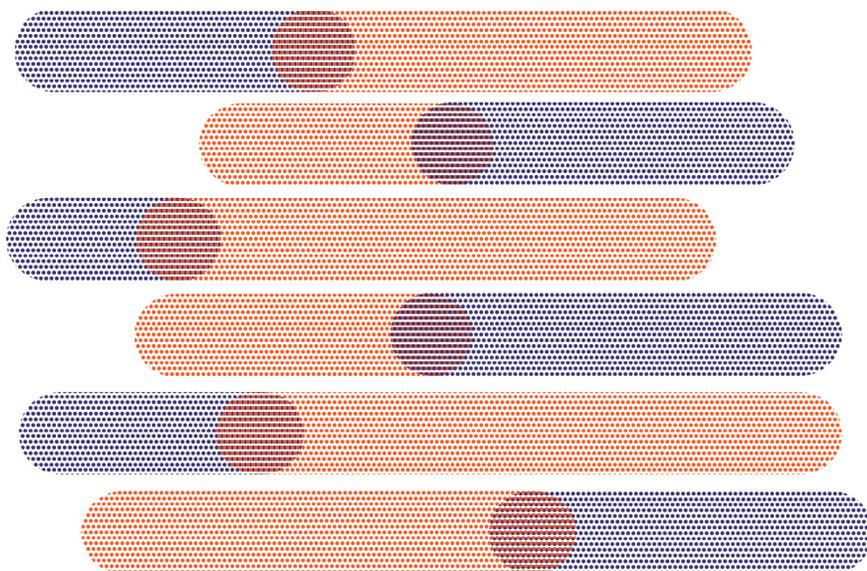
So while there are many fantastic reasons to write and read novels (I sure as hell hope so since I've just spent the last six years doing just that), I tend to think short stories

more closely mirror life, the mess of it, the sharp edges, the unanswered questions. A novel strings time together, creates a trajectory that characters must take from A to B. But a story, in its short, crystalline form, focuses and captures the essence of a specific moment, whether it's one of breathtaking beauty or heart-cracking grief, and tries to singe it into the mind of the reader forever.

SIOBHAN FALLON is the author of *THE CONFUSION OF LANGUAGES*



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HOW NOVEL AND SHORT STORY WRITING ARE DIFFERENT

by TIM GAUTREUX

First, there's the size to consider. If you make a mistake in a novel manuscript (a big mistake, like generating a whole chapter that's irrelevant), that error could require the modification of hundreds of pages. It could cause months of rewriting. But to fix a mistake in a short story, say a silly scene in a supermarket, you just have to cut and shuffle things around in a 6,000-word space.

Considering the size of a novel manuscript, it's easy to see why you need a tentative outline the way a body needs a skeleton to hold everything together. What's the result when you don't set up some sort of outline? I've read plotless manuscripts that wander around for hundreds of pages. I remember one that started with a tale of a Louisiana fisherman and morphed for no reason into a biography of an insurance salesman in Kansas City. I think the author got bored with one novel and decided to write out of it and into another. An outline also lets you have some idea of when the story is over. I've seen 700- and 800-page novel manuscripts that wound up that long just

because the writer had no idea when to stop. Sometimes the writer starts a hundred pages too early or stops writing two hundred pages too late. Such manuscripts annoy agents and editors, and it's unlikely that any publisher would consider printing such a cinderblock of wayfaring prose.

It's important to realize that, in a novel, characterization trumps plot. In a short story it's the other way around. It's just the nature of the beasts. Once you put the main character together with dialogue, description, exposition, etc., everything that happens in the novel will be caused by this person. It's his story, and generally his point of view, his beliefs, tendencies, appetites, education, personal fascinations, and so on will cause the novel to happen. Also, novel readers like to live with interesting characters for a time. That's why novels that are all action with thin or little characterization are hard for most people to finish. You can identify with, be shocked by, love, pity, or disrespect a main character, and it really doesn't matter that much which it is, because you're there by his side

IT'S IMPORTANT TO REALIZE THAT, IN A NOVEL, CHARACTERIZATION TRUMPS PLOT. IN A SHORT STORY IT'S THE OTHER WAY AROUND.



for 325 pages and you know him. You want desperately to see how things turn out for him. But if all you have is gunfire and explosions, and you don't feel for anybody in the plot, you'll get bored pretty quick.

Short stories depend on getting off the ground quick. Open up an anthology of modern fiction and see how many stories get conflict going in the first paragraph or sometimes in the first sentence. On the other hand, many novels will ease the reader into the narrative the way some people ease into a hot bath and it may take half a chapter before the reader senses what this narrative is going to be about. To some small extent there is more room to bang about in a novel, to include semi-relevant details and supporting information about characters, a little dab of extra descriptive detail to set tone or mood. Characterization of the main actor can be pretty elaborate.

A short story is a mechanism like an automobile engine and every piece of it has a function. Lift up the hood and every part is relevant, everything contributes to make the car work. You don't see a spark plug scotch taped to the radiator with a note, "Found this on the floor at the factory, thought you'd like to have it." Characterization in the short form has to be intense, what I call "lightning characterization" in which an author lets us know all about a person with one sentence. In her story

"Parker's Back," Flannery O'Connor lets us know what Parker's wife is like with this: "The skin on her face was thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two icepicks."

Readers like to take their time with a novel and read it on vacation or during several bedtime sessions. Novels take a plane to the beach; short stories, however, ride the bus. Everything has to happen in a narrow box. Every word over 6,500 diminishes its chance of being taken by a magazine.

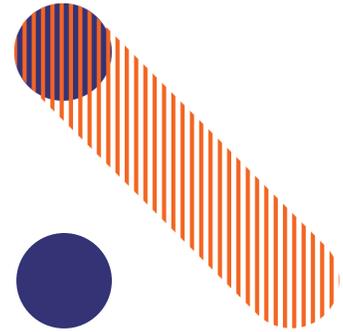
Lastly, a short story is fun to revise because it's easy to shift scenes around and make cuts, even change endings or the gender of the main character. Set it aside a week, and when you come back to it you'll see ways to make it better with a couple hours of work. Revise it eight times if you want. But a novel has to be built more carefully to begin with. You can't revise it eight times and have a life.

TIM GAUTREAU is the author of *SIGNALS*



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SHORT STORIES DEPEND ON GETTING OFF THE GROUND QUICK.



WHAT J.D. SALINGER CAN TEACH US ABOUT THE PRESENT

by MANDY BERMAN

In my own work, I find it hard to tell a story without dredging up the past. I want to dig deep into a character's personal history: into their psyches, their families, their traumas. I want to understand why they are who they are, and I want my readers to understand why, too. So it perhaps seems strange that I'm fixated on "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" by J.D. Salinger, a story that's told entirely in present action. The truth is, I can get so bogged down in my characters' pasts that I tend to forget that present scenes with urgency and high stakes can be the most engrossing elements of fiction. And so I often go back to Salinger's stories, this one in particular, to study exactly how that is done without sacrificing the elements of backstory needed to develop a fully fleshed character.

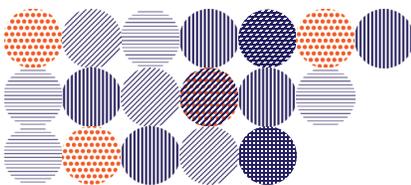
In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," the first story in Salinger's *Nine Stories* collection, there is little exposition, and no backstory that isn't revealed through present action or dialogue. Salinger writes for his smartest readers, and expects them to pay attention. Because Seymour

Glass's condition is only shown to us - via his behavior with others, and discussed obliquely in a telephone conversation between his wife and her mother - we are asked to infer that he might be unwell, and to guess at offstage events of the past using the sparse amount of evidence we are given. Although enigmatic, the story provides just enough of a roadmap to lead us to its shocking yet inevitable ending.

It begins in a hotel room in Florida. Seymour's wife, Muriel, is painting her nails. She allows the phone to ring five or six times before she picks it up; she is "a girl for whom a ringing phone dropped exactly nothing." It's her mother. Muriel is calm and unfazed throughout the conversation, which puts in stark contrast her mother's hysterical concerns about Seymour. We can infer via her mother's anxiety that Seymour is unwell, and perhaps even dangerous. On the third page, Muriel's mother references a car crash in the not-so-distant past:

"When did you get there?"

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHY THEY ARE WHO THEY ARE.



"I don't know. Wednesday morning, early."

"Who drove?"

"He did," said the girl. "And don't get excited. He drove very nicely. I was amazed."

"He drove? Muriel, you gave me your word of --"

"Mother," the girl interrupted, "I just told you. He drove very nicely. Under fifty the whole way, as a matter of fact."

"Did he try any of that funny business with the trees?"

"I said he drove very nicely, Mother ... I asked him to stay close to the white line, and all, and he knew what I meant, and he did. He was even trying not to look at the trees -- you could tell. Did Daddy get the car fixed, incidentally?"

Salinger continues to reveal key pieces of information via this conversation: The year is 1948. Seymour recently lived in Germany. Seymour is seeing a doctor who is worried that he "may completely lose control." Readers who work to connect the dots grow to understand that Seymour fought in WWII and is suffering from mental illness as a result. We also glean that Muriel's parents are worried for her safety, while Muriel herself is unconcerned - a dynamic that becomes essential

for the story's dénouement.

We meet Seymour in the next scene and the story grows stranger. A young girl named Sybil, unaccompanied by any adults, finds Seymour sunbathing on the beach, and the two of them develop a friendly rapport. The way Seymour speaks with her is playful and whimsical, but it borders on uncanny:

"Sybil," he said, "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll see if we can catch a bananafish."

"A what?"

"A bananafish ... I imagine you've seen quite a few bananafish in your day."

Sybil shook her head.

"You haven't? Where do you live anyway?" ...

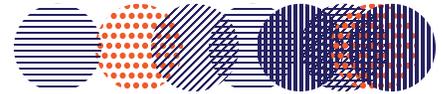
"Whirly Wood, Connecticut," she said ...

"Whirly Wood, Connecticut," said the young man. "Is that anywhere near Whirly Wood, Connecticut, by any chance?"

Sybil looked at him. "That's where I live," she said impatiently. "I live in Whirly Wood, Connecticut."

These bananafish, which Seymour has invented for Sybil, swim into a hole and eat so many bananas that they're too fat to get out. Eventually, they get "banana fever" and die.

WE MEET SEYMOUR IN THE NEXT SCENE AND THE STORY GROWS STRANGER.



SALINGER TRUSTS HIS READERS TO PIECE TOGETHER THE REASONS USING THE CRUMBS HE'S LEFT FOR US.



The bananafish of course represent Seymour himself, though this may not be clear to readers until finishing the story. Because of Seymour's psychological damage from the war, his struggles to re-assimilate into society, and his discomfort around Muriel and her family, he is stuck in the hole, destined for death. He can't go back to war, but he can't fit in at home, either.

When he reenters the hotel, we see that his playful way of interacting with children does not translate into his interactions with adults. He scares a woman out of an elevator, irrationally accusing her of looking at his feet, at which point we gain a greater understanding of Seymour's paranoia.

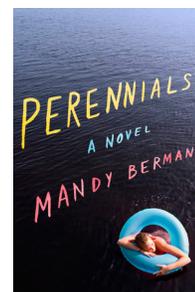
And then the last paragraph: Seymour enters his room, where Muriel is sleeping, and takes a gun out of his suitcase. Salinger ends the story: "Then he went over and sat down on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple."

There's no internal monologue about Seymour's suicide before he does it. No explicit explanations as to the whys and the hows. But this lack of explanation and exposition is what makes this story, and particularly its ending, so effective. Salinger trusts his readers to piece together the reasons using the crumbs he's left for us - which makes for an active and exciting reading process, and in the

end, builds up an ending that's both unexpected and inescapable.

It's strange, I know, that I love this story about war, PTSD, and suicide - dark themes that couldn't be further from my own novel about the joys and pains of being an adolescent girl. But "Bananafish" is a testament to the universality of good storytelling: active scenes that give us all the information we need; realistic dialogue that propels a narrative forward; an ending that leaves us awestruck, making us immediately want to page back and gather the evidence that led to it. Salinger teaches me that fiction is far less about subject matter and far more about the craft of storytelling in itself. Again and again, I study his writing, as I try to make my own readers feel even a fraction of the way his work makes me feel - smart, and surprised, and exhilarated.

MANDY BERMAN is the author of *PERENNIALS*



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HOW TO CREATE A CHARACTER IN SHORT FICTION

by LESLEY NNEKA ARIMAH

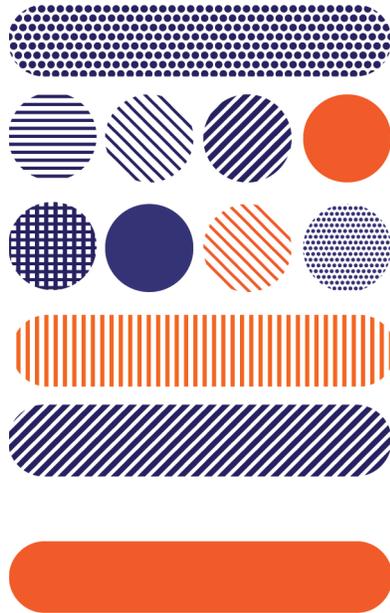
Imagine this common scenario: You are at a party, perhaps a neighborhood meet-and-greet where you are likely to be meeting people for the first time.

You find yourself in a corner with the woman who lives two doors down and she seems like someone you would like to get to know. She seems friendly enough, but there are so many more interesting people in the room and you know you

have a tendency to make people's eyes glaze over. How do you proceed so that she gets to know you, too?

You do not (hopefully) launch into the story of your life, overwhelming her with minutiae and your opinion on every conceivable issue; you do not (again, hopefully) blurt out every interesting (to you) thought you've ever had. You existed for quite some time before you started

this conversation, you will continue to exist after it's done, and one exchange cannot bear the weight of your entirety. The information you



reveal is contextual, perhaps responses to a direct query or a reaction to something happening in the room. Your short story is that conversation and your reader is the person you are speaking to. As you are writing your story, you must ask yourself if what

you're revealing about your character is pertinent.

Creating a complex character does not require an info dump of characteristics or backstory and can in fact have the opposite effect. Too much information can read like a sketch of a character that will take your reader out of the world you're creating by making them too aware of the author at work. Forced and ir-

AS YOU ARE WRITING YOUR STORY, YOU MUST ASK YOURSELF IF WHAT YOU'RE REVEALING ABOUT YOUR CHARACTER IS PERTINENT.

TREAT THE STORY LIKE A CONVERSATION, NOT A LECTURE.

relevant blocks of character info too clearly show your hand as a writer because your reader will immediately pick up on your attempts to manufacture personality.

One good method to writing multifaceted characters within the confines of a short story requires that you change the way you think about writing character. You must discover, not invent, who your character is. The character lived before the moment you first put her on the page and will exist after you're done with this 3,000- to 7,000-word snippet of her life. Approaching character development as discovery rather than invention allows you to relax as you are not taxing yourself to make up an entire interesting person. Just as one conversation cannot fully encompass the details of your life, one story cannot be responsible for the entirety of your character's life. If the goal is to have your character come across as complex and full-bodied as anyone in the real world, then you must render her, her world, and her interactions with her environs with the same nuance

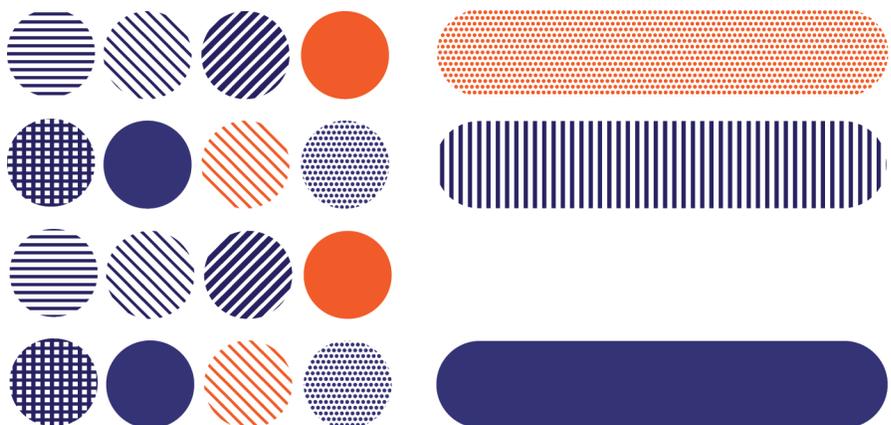
that exists in real life. And this nuance often means that less is more. Treat the story like a conversation, not a lecture.

You must let it come naturally. Let your character respond to the stimulus you place around her. Invent the plot and then discover your character's responses to what's happening around her. Your character's unself-conscious reactions will reveal her to be multifaceted.

LESLEY NNEKA ARIMAH is the author of *WHAT IT MEANS WHEN A MAN FALLS FROM THE SKY*



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7 THOUGHTS ON GETTING A SHORT STORY COLLECTION PUBLISHED

by JULIANNE PACHICO

1) Read the kind of story collections you want to write. Read as much as possible, as often as possible. You will have to spend less time on the Internet in order to do this.

2) Think about the underlying theme of your collection. Do your stories take the reader on a journey, from beginning to end? The order of your stories will be key. It will also help your collection if you can sell it in a way that emphasizes the connection between stories, the underlying themes. Even a collection linked by place (such as Colin Barrett's *Young Skins*, or Thomas Morris's *We Don't Know What We're Doing*) can make a book stand out more, in terms of making a pitch to publishers.

3) Submit everywhere, to everything, all the time. I made a document on my desktop called "100 REJECTIONS" and made a numbered list. My goal was to get exactly that, one hundred rejections, from journals, magazines, competitions, and agents alike. I never made it to one hundred, because the fact that

I was forcing myself to submit so often led to me getting nominated for a short story prize, which in turn led to getting an agent. In many ways this could have been random luck, but I choose to take comfort in mathematical statistics (a subject I was terrible in at school, but nonetheless!). I firmly believe that the more often you fail, the closer to success you will come. Crave failure and rejection - embrace it.

4) With that being said, hold on to your truly best work. It would be sad to have your very best short story published in a smaller journal, and then have nothing to offer one of the bigger publications once they come knocking on your door (and hopefully if you submit enough, they will). Try to figure out how to be selfish, and when. Writing a lot helps with this.

5) But with that being said, let go of the idea that public acclaim and exposure is somehow equivalent to how good or worthwhile your work is. There are many different kinds of success and there's no reason to see

I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT THE MORE OFTEN YOU FAIL, THE CLOSER TO SUCCESS YOU WILL COME.



a collection or story published by a small or independent publisher as “less” of an achievement than those by a “big” publisher. If you are relying on other people’s reactions to feel good about your writing, then you are on a dangerously slippery slope. You should feel good about writing because of the work itself - the satisfaction of a job well done will

ultimately be the only reward. If you are writing because a) you want people to love you, b) you want to be famous, c) you want to post

things on social media about your successes, d) you want to be rich, and so on, you are choosing the wrong profession. Especially if you are writing short stories.

6) On a similar note, let go of the idea that your short story collection will net you a big advance. One of the best pieces of advice I received was to begin working on a novel while revising my collection, so that my agent and I could have something else to pitch to publishers. I think pretty much every single publisher who approached me asked, “So are you working on a novel?”

7) Writing short stories is an amaz-

ing opportunity to take risks with your work, to explore different characters and settings, and to write endings that are open, ambiguous, and tense. Whereas readers and publishers tend to approach novels with certain expectations (plots, resolution, conflicts, journeys), in short stories you can do things that are a lot more meandering, diverse, and

strange. Enjoy it. Your short story collection is a gift to the world, and only you can bring it into existence. So don’t stress too much about when,

whether, or how your collection will get published: Stay calm and keep writing. Sooner or later you will figure it out.



JULIANNE PACHICO is the author of *THE LUCKY ONES*



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HOW TO WRITE A SHORT STORY IN 3 SIMPLE STEPS

by CHARLES YU

STEP ONE: IDEA FORMATION

Let's say you have an idea for a story. Throw it out. It's no good. Even if it is good, it's no good. Come up with a different idea. Now, take the second idea (which we will call Idea #2), and very carefully throw it out. Next, the physical environment. By which I mean, your physical environment. Writing is a physical act. Are you facing a wall? Strolling? Gazing out at an infinite vista through a keyhole? Whatever. Stop doing that. Next, beat yourself up a little bit. This is terrible. You are terrible. Come up with between three and 500 more ideas. You know what to do with them. Throw them out. All of them.

Return to that first idea. Now it's good. Magic!

Or is it?

If you are still thinking about it, it might be.

STEP TWO: PROCRASTINATION

Put on your "writer" hat and start "writing."

If you do not have a "writer" hat then no problem. You will not be

able to be a "writer," unfortunately. If you were a real "writer" with a real "writer" hat, then what you would do is choose smart words and arrange them in a way so as to project the impression to people that what they are reading is "writing" by a "writer." But you don't have the hat, so never mind all of that. It's OK. There are many other jobs. They all pay better.

If you insist on persisting, then you can try it without the hat. I mean, it won't be the same. What you will have to do instead is trick your own brain. One way to trick your brain, is to, instead of trying to write, to do a thing called not-writing. Not-writing looks exactly like writing. If you are looking at a person who looks like they are not-writing, there is a good chance they are writing.

Here's the tricky part, though. The opposite of not-writing is not-not-writing. Which is not the same as writing. Or "writing."

Not-not-writing also looks the same as writing, except for one key difference: Because of the double-negative, your brain is confused. Use that confusion. Because it won't

**COME UP WITH
BETWEEN
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THEM OUT. ALL
OF THEM.**

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU ARE TRYING TO SAY, EVEN IF IT DOESN'T SEEM LIKE SOMETHING THAT CAN'T BE ARTICULATED.

last long. Your brain will figure it out and then snap back to trying to “write” or not-write. During this precious window of time, what you want to do is write down all the words you would “write” if you had the courage to do it.

Focus on what you are trying to say, even if it doesn't seem like something that can't be articulated, even if it seems too weird or like shorthand, it's OK. Don't worry about weird language or strange thoughts.

Just keep not-not-writing for as long as possible.

STEP THREE: COMPLETION

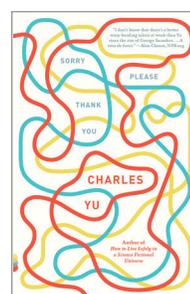
Step two, as you may have figured out, was all a lie. Not-not-writing

is not a thing. Obviously. Come on. But, look, you wrote a short story.

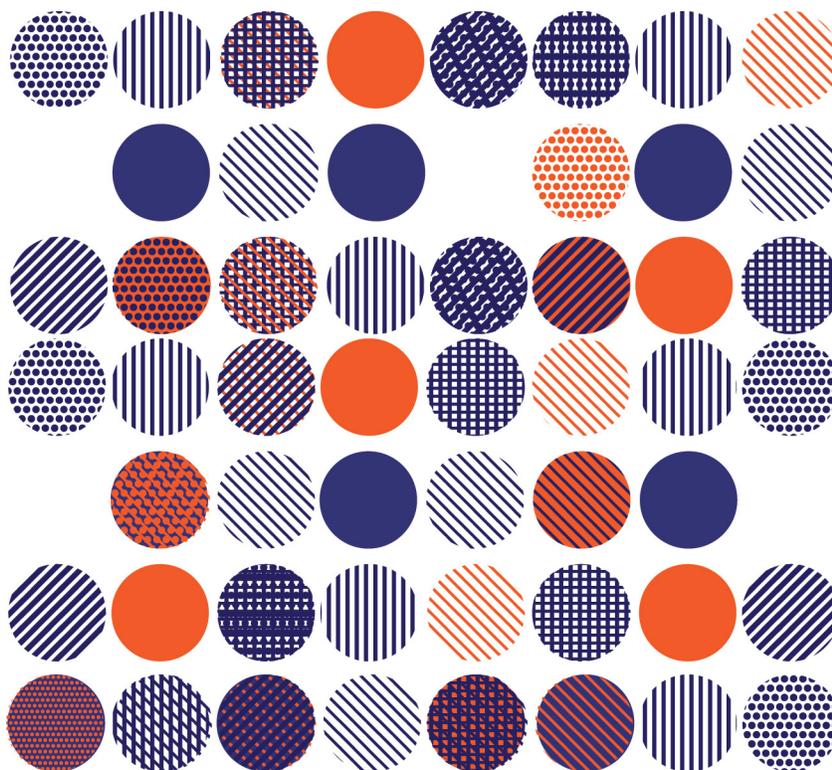
Now, forget all of this. Get amnesia. Bang your head against the wall. Loathe yourself. Beat yourself up.

Go back to step one. Repeat.

CHARLES YU is the author of *SORRY PLEASE THANK YOU*



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THE POWER OF JOURNALING TO CAPTURE IDEAS

by RYDER CARROLL

When I was young, I loved looking at ancient astrological maps that seemed more like celestial bestiaries than effective means of navigation. The skies were teeming with terrifying ancient creatures ranging from giant scorpions, to centaurs, to beasts whose names have been long forgotten. Each born from man's attempt to make sense of the breathtaking chaos of light that revealed itself on the darkest nights. Most cultures developed long, elaborate stories that buried their heroes and demons in the stars, all to make some sense of the world around them.

If you've ever stared up at a night sky, clear of clouds or city lights, you can't help but architect your own existential explanations just to cope with the shimmering abyss. It's estimated that each year, 100 billion stars are born and die in the observ-

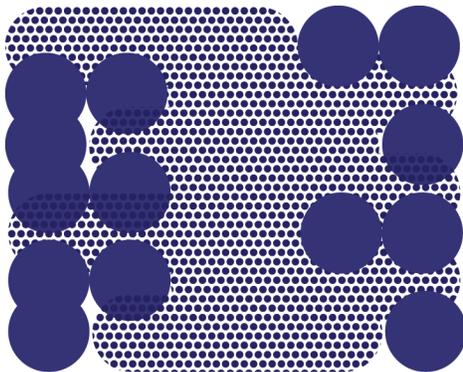
able universe. That's 247 million a day! Yet, even in this age of Google Maps, stars continue to serve as a fundamental way to understand our place.

Stars have safely guided explorers across the hungry depths of alien oceans for centuries. But how? It all started by jotting down what we

saw, one star at a time until it began to make sense. We found patterns, and identified relationships. From centaurs to quasars, each

generation refined their knowledge and understanding to better help contextualize the stars as they related to us.

Writing can feel very much like setting out on a journey into the unknown. But rather than stars, we're reliant on the glittering constellation of ideas scattered across the vast darkness of our minds. Buried



**WRITING CAN
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UNKNOWN.**

NOTEBOOKS HAVE STOOD THE TEST OF TIME AS THE ULTIMATE TRAPS FOR CAPTURING THOUGHTS, NO MATTER HOW EXOTIC.

somewhere up there are parts of all the stories we will ever tell. It's important that we figure out a way to make sense of our thoughts, and it starts with cataloging them, one thought at a time.

Be it for the next story, or the last, journaling can serve as a form of mental cartography. Your journal can be a mental atlas, which can be referenced as you set sail or when you get lost at sea. Like stars,

thoughts can be used as waypoints. Stories are simply sequences of curated thoughts, which are plotted out to guide your

audience safely through your tale. Without them, there are only dark shoreless oceans.

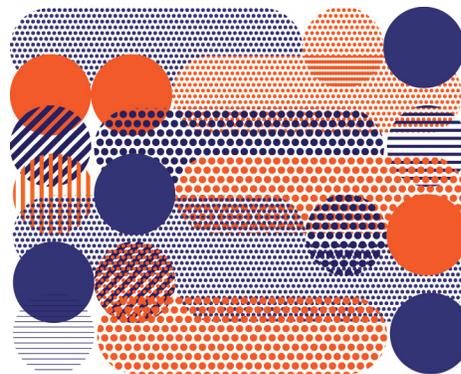
The beauty of keeping some kind of journal is that it can live in a vacuum. It simply serves as a repository for ideas, waiting to be used. Some are hesitant to journal because they're only aware of long-form journaling, which can seem time consuming. True, but the process of drawing your ideas out by hand can be an incredibly effective practice to capture and refine your thoughts.

If you're not convinced it's worth the effort, short-form journaling is

a perfect alternative - or addition to - long-form journaling. In both cases, the point is to cultivate a map of your thoughts and insights. Isn't there an app for that? Sure, but writing your ideas out by hand will make them seem far more tangible and real. This practice also allows you to capture ideas in all their many forms. A nascent idea could begin as an image or a shape.

Notebooks have stood the test of

time as the ultimate traps for capturing thoughts, no matter how exotic. Over time, they become maps. Like stars, ideas without



maps, no matter how bright, remain meaningless. And, like stars, ideas fade. There really is nothing more frustrating than losing a brilliant thought before you had the chance to find its purpose. Each thought has the promise of functioning as your north star, so be sure you keep track of it.

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